

# RLS 2010: Picturesque Notes

Conference notes on 'RLS 2010: Locating Stevenson', Stirling 7-10 July 2010

by Richard Dury



## Wednesday - arrival

The train journey from Edinburgh was a continual delight of flashing foreground details and background evolving at its own calmer pace, the conference programme on the table before me, pen in hand, and pleasant wandering thoughts. On arrival at Stirling station, I was immediately struck by the new footbridge over the tracks - crossing lightly from city-centre side to Forth side, it could have been a dull series of concrete pillars--instead: a magnificent piece of sculpture with pylons of ingeniously gradating angles and length. I gazed long, attempting to understand its fascinating structure and the way the stays attached to the pylons give the bridge all the appearance of holding itself up by its own bootstraps.

Scott Hames had provided full travel notes from the station, but he could not foresee the temporary diversion that led to me being left at the wrong entrance to the campus. I spent some time (a heliocentric astronomer in a new telescopic age) ingeniously fitting paths on the map with those I could see in front of me, till I finally met a pedestrian, who pointed me way over on the far side of the loch. (Hooray for trolleys.)

The Pathfoot Building (the conference venue) is the original University building from the 1960s. As I approached, I thought wistfully of that past and more prosperous age: the 1960s were not only an outstanding ferment in ideas and the arts, but also in Britain the age of the new universities, new civic theatres, public libraries. Most students not only had their fees paid for but got a grant to live on too. Another world. The

building is a low-cost solution that looks good: a central corridor steps up the hillside via flights of steps and automatic doors, with secondary corridors branching off on either side to form a series of square units around courtyards with plants and sculptures.

I was welcomed by Scott (bespectacled, brown-sandy hair, soft relaxed North-American accent, in a blue blazer and blue-striped shirt, just slightly apprehensive, but who wouldn't be). The two years since Bergamo had brought changes for both of us--for Scott, from bachelor to married man and expectant



father; for me, from Professor to, well, old-age pensioner. So it goes. Anyway, I got sorted out and, meeting Barry Menikoff, went off with him to find our rooms in the halls just along from Pathfoot, stepping down the slope in V-like lines. Exploring together, we found our way along mysterious corridors and stairs to rooms next to each other. The situation suddenly reminded me of being nineteen years old and arriving at University for the first time: the strange building, getting lost, meeting a friend.

At nine o' clock we had more orienteering exercise, threading our way through the modular corridors to the sloping lecture theatre. There was Scott again with Adrian Hunter (co-organizer) beside a table of glasses of wine and small things to eat. The event was a pre-conference screening of *Kidnapped*--appropriate for a conference at the border of Highlands and Lowlands. Even with the ever-interesting Michael Caine it was slightly disappointing (Robert Wise's *The Body Snatcher* or Mamoulian's *Jekyll and Hyde* would have been my choices). But it made me think of the paradox of 'cinematic' adventure-story-writer Stevenson and the absence of good adventure films based on his books. And then I started making mental screenplays, in which I would start from Stevenson's quasi-storyboard of camera

movements. But how would you translate his typical rapid descriptions by a few salient features



when photography shows you everything all at once? Clearly a problem. Then, later than expected, we went to the nearby pub, an unscholarly atmosphere of

competing music and conversation, where in a slightly calmer conservatory I had a chat with Eric Massie (who was the main organizer of the Stevenson conference in 2000) and a last sad goodbye to his wife Maggie, on their way to a holiday in the sun.

#### Thursday

Before sessions I walked over to the main building from the dormitories. I was surprised that--after ten years--my feet remembered perfectly the steps and the paths down to the loch. There was a bench by the water's edge so I sat down to contemplate the scene--hey, I'm an old-age pensioner, that's the kind of thing I'm supposed to do! As ten years before I was impressed by the successful picturesqueness of it all: sinuous, reed-fringed loch, the willows and oaks, the scampering rabbits and gliding ducks.

The conference day opened with a plenary session, prefaced by a welcoming address from Scott and a summing up of ten years of conferences by Rory Watson. The first conference was actually not intended to be the first of a series, but I was there with Richard Ambrosini and he was enthusiastic about having another in two years time and I agreed to help him. So it was, at the closing session Richard stood up and proposed a conference at Gargnano in 2002.

Ah yes, Richard Ambrosini; several people asked where he was, since he'd been an important presence at all the previous conferences - standing up, tall, red-bearded at the end of papers to make pertinent comments and always giving a paper himself of original thought and far-ranging reference. So where was 'the other Richard'? In a few words, Richard Ambrosini was a volume editor for Stevenson's essays in the new EUP edition, we had even agreed to edit two of the four volumes together after the very enjoyable experience of co-editing *European Stevenson*. Then he interpreted comments from

some other editors as subtly criticizing his philosophic-aesthetic approach and promoting the dominant 'cultural studies' approach. Considering himself offended, he not only broke off all contacts with the edition but also with myself. Pity. I don't know if there was an offence or not (I'm a bit unobservant in these things: I often don't see that two people are having an affair, or someone is gay or another is wearing a toupée, when to other people 'It's obvious'). A pity too that I actually agree with RA about his approach to literature and we had many a conversation about it over lunches in Milan. Let's hope we see him in Sydney in 2013.

Our first plenary speaker was Stuart Kelly, literary editor of *The Scotsman on Sunday*, of gangling elegance in rimless glasses and a three-piece linen suit, striped shirt and Liberty tie. His argument--in a knowledgeable and witty talk--was that Stevenson belongs to a nineteenth-century Scottish tradition exploring 'artificial' and self-conscious artistry, and the way reality and literature are both related and distant.

Coffee and biscuits was in the crush hall, a doubled-height space with interesting paintings (sculpture and paintings are notable at Stirling) that opens up, like an exhalation, a magical luminous space, half-way along the main stepped corridor. The in-house catering was excellent, coffee fragrant, biscuits crisp. We milled, mingled--I noticed that apart from the familiar delegates there were a good number of Edinburgh Club members and others present, so excellent work by Scott in advertising and outreach.

A conference is a carefully-planned meeting of people to hear talks on a subject of common interest, so organized as to prevent any one person from hearing most of them. That's what I thought on the train coming in as I looked over the programme and tried to work out which sessions to go to: indeed, of the twenty-two papers I ticked, I was only able to go to seven. But by going the whole hog and having only two plenaries and otherwise three parallel sessions, Scott found a formula where the impossibility of going to what you liked was so clear that we learnt resignation and went happily to what we could. A conference is also a Canterbury pilgrimage and a market day: a break from routine, the thought-stimulating experiences of travel, meeting new people, bumping into people you know. As far as this sketch is concerned, however, my account may well seem to a fellow-delegate to be of a quite different conference. If I may be allowed one more comparison, the conference becomes like a party,

where one person's reminiscence will be very different from another's.

Anyway, after the break, Robert-Louis Abrahamson, in beige and brown and a paisley scarf, talked of Stevenson the essayist in the London literary world of the 1870s. Here, the Savile Club was important for Stevenson as a place to meet publishers, editors and other writers in an informal, anti-conventional atmosphere. Yet his difficulty of conversing with the 'grand, tree-like' Englishmen, who seem to have treated him as a 'pet bohemian', is perhaps reflected in the theme of incommunicability in the late-70s essays. Overviewing the 70s essays as a whole, what stands out is the constant radical distrust of dogma, and the brilliant shifting points-of-view and games-playing with the reader in allusions and language-use.

Sara Ames, Edinburgh PhD student (simple white top and purple skirt, quiet but confident) talked about the 'Suicide Club'. She has discovered that its publication was followed by a rash of sensational newspaper reports of (probably imagined) similar clubs--showing how it appealed to contemporary anxieties about modern cities, 'convenience', the obsession with consumption and the new shadowy figure

of the entrepreneur. This was Sara's first conference paper and a successful performance.

Last in this panel, Annette Federico (elegant in black dress and light grey cardigan, speaking calmly, with precision) gave an ethical interpretation of 'death' in Stevenson's essays and narratives (the 'ethical turn' in her title alluding to the new 'ethical criticism' that began in the 1990s). In the absorbing process of reading, we feel human kinship and even confront and accept the idea of death. In narratives, strikingly pictorial deaths can memorably associate sacrifice and

death. In essays in which he depicts an indifferent universe and a monstrous existence, Stevenson argues for living for an ideal, and the importance of journey and struggle as an essential part of life.

Lunch was in the Pathfoot dining room--excellent food in a calm, double-height space of simple geometry.

In the afternoon, I went to a panel that started with Linda Dryden (one of those who have been to all the RLS conferences so far; the others are Jenni Calder, Barry Menikoff and myself), energetic as always in a short cutaway soft leather jacket. RLS, often seen as a mere writer of popular genres, actually manipulates and combines them, mixing high and low elements. Though sometimes presented as a writer who had only weak imitators, the Florizel stories, *Dynamiter* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* were a major influence on urban gothic, detective stories and science fiction,

influencing Machen, Doyle, Conrad and Wells.

Then it was my turn to speak about Stevenson's essays on Japanese topics. RLS was attracted to Japanese culture for two reasons: tales of moral courage (in 'Yoshida-Torajiro' and 'Two Japanese Romances'), and for the aesthetics of Japanese prints, which he

praises in a letter to Bob and in 'Two Japanese Romances' (the latter in Henley's *Magazine of Art* which played an important part in spreading interest in Japanese Art). Affinities with his own aesthetics can be seen in the emphasis on formal patterning (especially through stark contrast), playful manipulation of forms and an attention to 'imaginative truth' and rejection of 'realism'.

We stayed in Japan with the next talk by Yamamoto Taku on Nakajima Asushi's *Light, Wind and Dreams* (1942) which is constructed around alternate first-person chapters of Stevenson on



*Between Pathfoot and Halls: Ilaria Sborgi, Tania Zulli, Robert-Louis Abrahamson and Sylvie Largeaud-Ortega*



Samoa and chapters of Nakajima's own Samoan diary. Clearly Nakajima, a pessimistic, lonely fighter, uncertain about his literary worth, was mapping his own feelings and experience on those of Stevenson. Like Stevenson he is critical of exploitative colonialism yet hopeful of a benevolent form of it, though we can also see this as being in line with pre-war Japanese propaganda of supporting local peoples against white intruders.

While I was speaking, Barry Menikoff was giving his talk in another room, but as he later gave me a copy of the paper I can give a quick sketch of it here. The best approach to Stevenson's style (foregrounded, yet elusive) is his own essay on the subject. This is a remarkable piece of formal criticism; his original terms (and the ideas behind them) are ahead of their time. He argues that all arts aim to make a pattern, and in literature the elements are woven together to form a 'knot' in the sentence--an intricate figure, something that the reader notices--which is then resolved in confirmation or surprise. The textual 'web' is made up of interwoven form and meaning, and the latter must be brief and clear without meaningless fillers (reminding us of Stevenson's own 'later style'). For Stevenson, art is an intellectual activity requiring skill and concentration. For him, style *is* art.

The rest of the afternoon was free and I met with the other three editors of the essays in the new EUP edition. We brought two benches together in one of the gravelled courtyards and discussed policy, and what to do next. I like working together with them on this project: Robert-Louis Abrahamson, gently eccentric Stevenson expert, Alex Thomson serious literary critic yet amusing too, and the positive Lesley Graham who always reminds me of a refreshing Scottish breeze.

Our second and last plenary lecture was again by an illustrious non-academic, James Robertson, author of the highly-praised *The Testament of Gideon Mack*, a narrative closely interweaving



themes of Scottish culture and literature, including *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. We had gathered in the entrance hall of Airthrey Castle, a room of inventive geometry: a wall with an elaborate Adam fireplace (scenes from the life of Wallace), a

full circular bay (obviously a turret-form on the outside) with large windows framing the surrounding greenery; then, facing the fireplace a panelled screen with chinoiserie tiles, excluding the draft in a medieval way from the entrance door on the other side. At the back, the room turned to make an L, where Scott had organized another buffet with wine (*formidable, ce Scott !*). Robertson, in his vigorous fifties in open-necked tartan shirt, swaying from one foot to another, gave an appreciation of RLS from the point-of-view of another Scottish writer. He started by going through his rejection by Modernist critics, an episode that he explained by Stevenson's resistance to categorization, his popularity and his 'reliability'--never boring, frequently surprising, a writer of lightness of touch and yet moral gravity, a writer's writer.

We then got into a coach which took us a short journey through the dark (like the trip to Santa's grotto) to where we tumbled out, at the Sherrifmuir Inn, near the site of the the 1715 battle. At the Inn's long table, on chairs with tall wrought-iron backs and tartan upholstery ('a relaxing blend of Scottish tradition and contemporary flair' - the Inn's unbeatable website), much chatting and place-hopping showed the importance of conversation at a conference. Mm, food good too.

## Friday

Friday morning, after my pre-breakfast walk by the loch, I chose what turned out for me to be the most interesting and united panel, with three papers on *Catriona*, *St Ives*, and *Weir*. Donald Mackenzie, with his shock of white hair and lilting speech, and an enviable knowledge of European and Scottish literature, started by pointing out that *Catriona* was Stevenson's one novel that measures itself with Scott. This can be seen in parallels with Scott characters and plot elements, the inset tale, the tangle of law and politics and the general interaction of protagonist with society at a point of crisis or transition. Yet Scott's inset 'Wandering Willie's Tale' is knit into story and history, while 'Tod Lapraik' is independent; and *Catriona*, like other late-nineteenth-century texts, retreats from the possibilities of the historical novel and 'grand narrative'--the love story is unconnected with historical processes and the story dwindles to a Hitchcockian thriller. And yet... the novel is no failure, for it possesses a Pushkin-like 'concise and systematic intelligence'. and it confronts history by reducing grand narrative to the absurd (as in *A Footnote to History*, with its affinities with the world-view of Swift, Conrad and the historian Lewis Namier).

Glenda Norquay talked of *St Ives* in the context of other 1890s romances. While Lang theorized a return to the timeless appeal of narrative (and Stevenson explored the immersion of the reader and the therapeutic value of romance), another strand in 1890s romance undermined this by emphasizing ageing and death of protagonists. We find this in the romances of Stanley J. Weyman that Stevenson enjoyed and in *St Ives*. Far from simply reviving a lost romance tradition, *St Ives* self-consciously parodies it--the protagonist comments on his own over-romantic actions, and his cousin is clearly a parody villain.

Saverio Tomaioli (who had been at Gargnano in 2002 as a PhD student and who remembered--talking with me one coffee break--meeting Barry Menikoff on their morning lakeside runs) traced the affinities of *St Ives* and *Weir*, often characterized as: 'mere adventure romance' versus 'unfinished masterpiece'. Yet these two last long works are both set in Scotland in 1813 and examine the idea of 'Scottishness', both examine the problem of evil and present women as natural forces. They also make a direct confrontation with Scott, mentioned in one, and given a walk-on cameo role in the other. *St Ives*, the 'mere romance', has an interesting outsider's view of Scotland and (as Glenda had just pointed out) parodies conventions by highlighting them (especially the 'functional character' of the double, Alain).

After coffee, I went to see Ann Colley (who has been to all the Stevenson conferences except Stirling 2000). She was examining Stevenson's idea of 'home' in a new way, for, though his return to Scottish subjects in the 1890s has typically been seen as nostalgic longing, Ann saw him as finding 'home' at last in Samoa--in a house he built himself and where he was directly engaged in local affairs. In another sense, Stevenson learnt in Samoa to accept 'home' as inevitably containing something foreign (the foreigner at home, a stranger in his own house).

Laurence Davies (in blue-striped shirt, blazer and jeans, burly yet gentle) examined pursuit narratives and *Kidnapped*. Stevenson's text contains several innovative features which changed the tradition of such stories: the lack of moralizing, the sympathy with other sufferers, the dangerous, closely-followed terrain (with no Romantic 'noble views'), the innocent abroad (not the bold adventurer), together with the stylistic immediacy of concise precision.

Ilaria Sborgi talked on Stevenson's idea of Scottishness. Intense, hesitant in search of the right word, yet arriving at good points (like a tightrope walker of shaky steps and perfect pirouettes), Ilaria pointed out how Stevenson saw the English as lacking interest in others, while the Scot is eager for sympathy. This accords with the centrality in Stevenson's poetics of sympathy and its intertwining of style and ethics. His attitude to Scotland (a country diverse, opposed, united) also helps to understand his interesting recognition of binary oppositions, his undermining of them and recognition of multiple identity.

After lunch I went with Robert-Louis on the sloping lawn under a fretted oak between two stepping

lines of halls of residence to practice 'The Persons of the Tale' for the concert that evening: me as Silver speaking a personal variant of Bristolian, Robert as Cap'n Smollet in Scots.

Then we boarded the bus for Loch Katrine. The 'S.S. Sir Walter Scott' took us to the top of the the loch

and back, between banks both rocky and wooded (no stags or hermits on our day); in the distance waves of more distant mountains; the sky of a thousand gradations of gray; fresh wind a-blowing and rain-drops a-flying and at intervals entertaining us to downright showers.

The banquet that evening was in the Pathfoot dining hall. We gave Scott and Adrian Hunter a bottle of whisky and a cash present (we hadn't got ourselves organized), the latter they immediately promised to Laavanyan Ratnapalan (not present),



Wet and breezy Loch Katrine: Lou and Gordon Hirsch, Saverio Tomaiuolo, Linda Dryden and Robert-Louis Abrahamson

who had been coming with his fiancée in a car that broke down on the motorway, 'help' for which we know can be expensive and then hired a car to make the rest of the journey. When the money was presented the next day, the couple were a picture thankfulness at a weight being taken off their minds. Unlike most conferences there was



Syvie and Rory aboard the 'Walter Scott'

no long thank-you speech, so let me take the opportunity, um, to say something for everyone. But [looking at shoes] not being very good with words, all I can say is... Thank you Scott and Adrian. You did a great job.

Apart from the record number of Stevenson scholars, important literary non-academics, the many welcoming glasses, and attracting a not exclusively academic audience, and organizing a trip out, and getting press coverage, and inviting the French Association RLS who had attractive illustrative panels of the 'chemin R.L. Stevenson' at the entrance, and coordinating the excellent catering, and constructing the best conference website ever... Scott and Adrian also organized an outstanding concert after the banquet. This latter failed to attract a good audience (maybe people preferred to chat) but for me it was a high point of the conference. It was more like a soirée, which, after the Dury-Abrahamson 'Persons of the Tale', went on to improve with a most memorable song concert from baritone Allan Smith accompanied by Alice Turner with some of my favourite settings of Stevenson poems (Hahn and Vaughan Williams, with some interesting ones by Ronald Stevenson that I didn't know); then we had a whisky-tasting interlude; then Tom Clelland and friends with their Scottish folk versions of Child's Garden verses (recently issued on CD), including a touching intermezzo by Jack and Caroline Fleming with Jack's a capella version of a song he'd written for a Samoan school musical based on the life of RLS. The second Pathfoot dining

room was a good place for music, with comfortable seats and windows behind the performance area overlooking the park, framing Allan Smith against a background of foliage in the late Scottish twilight in the first half, then darkening to increase the intimacy of the interior in the second.

### Saturday

The last day of a conference is always a little sad, with some people leaving early, bags left at the reception desk, parts of the temporary theatre beginning to be dismantled. Our voyage together was about to end--just when the way to Pathfoot was becoming familiar and we had learnt where the rooms were and how to serve ourselves in the dining room. So it was with a slightly heavy heart that we went to the last two sessions on Saturday morning.

I chose the one in the lecture theatre (where the conference had started for me on Wednesday evening): a cubic space with steeply stepped rows of seats within it. The panel was opened by Christy Di Frances, a young American scholar, who returned to the subject of 'home' and (appropriate for the last morning of a conference) the sadness of departure, here with reference to allusions to traditional songs. In *Kidnapped* the motif is present in David's exclusion from his own home and continues with his encounter with the Highland 'emigrants' and the homebreaking of James of the Glens. In each case, there is some direct or implied reference to Scottish songs of exile and loss of home. The allusion to songs is also present at the crossing of the Forth: Alan whistles a Jacobite song as a sign to Alison, whose transport of the fugitive across the water inevitably recalls the Skye Boat Song. This weaving in of songs and ballads is a bond-creating connection with shared and traditional texts.

Next to take the temporary stage was John Lyon (wearing a blue shirt with Penguin Books logo, since he is the curator of the Penguin Archive at Bristol University). His talk was like Turner pouring watercolours on the paper, scrubbing away furiously and finally producing a magnificent picture. Stevenson's main identification for Lyon is that of the autonomous artist and he sees him not as 'a great Scottish writer' but as 'a great writer born in Scotland'. With his focus on style, his provocative flaunting of 'arabesque prose', his relation to location is essentially ludic. (Hence, I thought, our difficulty in 'locating Stevenson')



Maureen Martin, a Scot living in the USA (bespectacled, in a long-collared, fuchsia blouse and grey jacket) next gave us quite a dense discussion of *Ballantrae*, Scottish identity and telling the national story. Mackellar is the figure of the Scottish author telling the tale of the two brothers but also of the nation. The interplay of competing, suspect and suppressed texts in this work tells us about the impossibility of 'narrating Scotland'; the unresolved relationship between the two brothers and their death-revival-death can also be mapped onto Scottish culture and history.

After the coffee break, we were amazingly at the last session. Mine opened with a Stevenson conference 'first', a delegate from Turkey: Azer Baru Kemaloglu (from Canakkale - tsanAKkaleh - University on the Dardenelles). Kemaloglu (short red hair, flamboyant red scarf around neck, chubby features) talked about the philosophical radicality of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. The novella challenges traditional norms: faith in science and progress, assumptions of a virtuous male ruling class, any idea of reality based on fixed definitions and the distinction of essence and appearance--all this in a context of fragmented style, narrative, psyche and space. Indeed, it can be seen as a postmodern text in its fragmentation, emphasis on surfaces and multiple identities and in the mixing of genres.

Trevor Grimshaw, serious, with severe framing beard, stated clearly at the beginning that his presentation of *Jekyll and Hyde* was in the political-cultural-historical context of the emergence of a new ruling élite in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. By the 1880s a new professional élite had a commanding social position, linked by common schooling and interests, justifying privilege not by birth but moral rectitude. Stevenson's novella takes all this apart: the élite are no better than others: they share an animal nature, protect each other from the law, forge documents, have a secret private life. Hyde, who they assume to be lower class, turns out to be one of them. The common sexual interpretations obscure this social critique. This was an admirable presentation of social-historical interpretation.

Unfortunately I was called away at this point so I was unable to hear Hilary Beattie's

paper on psychoanalytical interpretations of Stevenson's Gothic tales. And how many other papers I missed: fellow essays-editors Leslie Graham and Alex Thomson, the brilliant Matthew Kaiser, the equally brilliant Nathalie Jaeck, Rory Watson talking on existentialist horror, the always-interesting Richard Walker, the genial *simpatia* of Gordon Hirsch, the quiet intellectual

rigour of Burkhard Niederhoff, Jenni Calder who held the flame, David Pirie, who advised me on strategic management, Joachim Hemmerle who gave me the present of a book, Anne Noury, who told me about the Cévennes association, and all the others and all the new people, the PhD students...

The business meeting over, we said our many goodbyes. Then, having five minutes, I walked down to the loch for a last look before my lift back to Edinburgh. And an hour later we were once more among the streets, monuments and traffic of the Northern metropolis.



*Chilling out in the crush hall on the evening of the concert: Neil Brown, Shaf Towheed, Alex Thomson, Michelle Elleray, behind: John Lyon and Bob Irvine*

